DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 100 056 EA 006 677

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TITLE The Residence Hall as a Community in Higher Education.
INSTITUTION Denver Univ., Colo.; Educational Facilities Labs., Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Feb 75
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *College Housing; College Students; Community Benefits; *Dormitories; *Environmental Influences; *Experimental Programs; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; Student Participation

ABSTRACT

The University of Denver has developed an approach to residence hall living that is designed to significantly increase the positive effect of the environment on the student. Two residential programs complement the classroom environment by housing students with like or related academic interests and providing equipment related to the students' interests, thereby offering them the chance to manipulate and play, in an active manner, with the ideas that have been stimulated in the classroom. One program is designed for disciplines that predominantly use empirical methods, the other programs for disciplines dealing with symbolism and aesthetics. The academic performance of students living in the halls shows marked improvement, and resident retention within the halls, especially among students in the empirical hall, is four or five times the level achieved before the program began. (Author/MLF)

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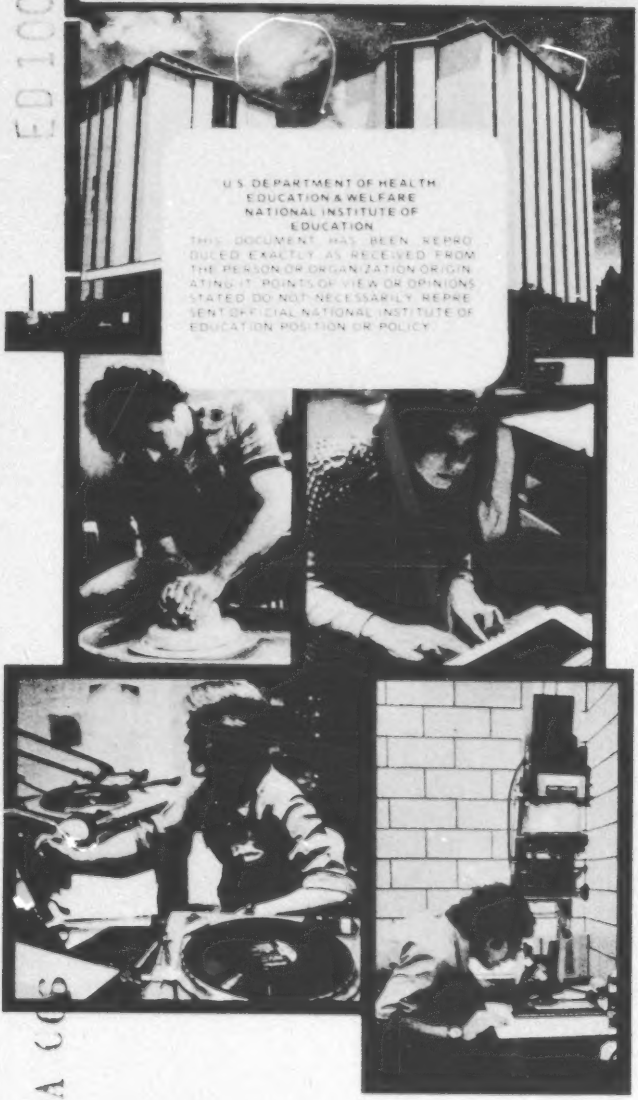

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Photos: (at top) Centennial Towers; (clockwise) computer room, arts center, darkroom, and radio station—all facilities for residents of campus housing, University of Denver.

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The Residence Hall as a Community in Higher Education

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February, 1975

An innovative program cosponsored by Educational Facilities Laboratories, Inc., and the University of Denver.

A residence hall is an environment – an environment that often dramatically affects the lives of the students living there. The institutional philosophy for residence halls is the greatest determinant of what impact residence halls have on students and varies widely from school to school. Some institutions see residence halls serving as a control function for student behavior. Others view residence halls as a service function for providing students with a minimum of outside diversions to allow a greater concentration on the classroom. Many hold that residence halls' contribution should be primarily financial, but an increasing number of institutions accept residence halls as an integral part of each student's total learning and developmental process.

Even with the wide diversity of national campus housing options, patterns are apparent. Arthur Chickering has found that a college housing experience is a significant predictor for identifying students most likely to complete college in four years.[1] Research at the University of Denver indicates a strong correlation between length in residence and academic success.[2] Those students with no residential experience hold the lowest grade point average in their senior year.

The University of Denver has developed an approach to residence hall living designed to significantly increase the positive effect of the environment on the student. This report will describe the conceptual framework underlying this approach, the means of implementing the approach and a preliminary assessment of the success of programs. This method for directing the environment towards positive results is only one of many possible ways that might encourage students to participate in opportunities that will contribute significantly to their social and intellectual growth.

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

There are several assumptions that were agreed upon prior to the development of the program. First, it was assumed that interaction with peers is an important part of both social and intellectual development. Second, it was assumed that as a part of an educational institution, the residence halls should complement and contribute to the accomplishment of institutional goals. Third, it was assumed that there were financial resources necessary to develop a comprehensive program in most existing residence hall operations. These resources are present only if one redirects the priorities for their use. Fourth, and closely related to the third assumption, it was believed that if a student finds his residence hall experience

productive, enjoyable and worthwhile he will consider repeating it. Last, it was assumed that adequate staffing was present and positions could be modified to fit the changed expectations.

It was held that the interaction which takes place within a true community would have the greatest positive impact on growth and development. For this reason, it was agreed that whatever framework was adopted, a key element had to be community development.

Robert Nisbet has stated that an essential element in community formation is a universally accepted "dogma," or to use a term with less of an emotional loading– "transcending value."[3] By that he meant that it was necessary to have at least one significant element within the environment with which all members agree and accept. Examples of this concept can be seen in other communities, as a religious community in which there are certain spiritual transcending values. Another would be an agrarian community in which there is the realization of the importance of man in relationship to the land.

Phillip Phenix gave us a philosophical statement and structure from which a system of transcending values could be identified within an educational corporate body.[4] Phenix's model states that man approaches knowledge in six ways: empirics (a factual relationship with the world), aesthetics (a contemplative perception), symbolics (using nondiscursive symbolic forms with generally accepted connotations), synnoetics (personal knowledge with meditative thought), ethics (moral meanings that express application rather than fact) and synoptics (integrates comprehensively the other five areas). This framework, while often times exceedingly complex, convinced us that it deserved testing in a residential situation. "Empirics" was chosen as the beginning point.

Phenix stated that empirics ". . . includes the sciences of the physical world, of living things, and of man. These sciences include factual descriptions, generalizations and theoretical formulations which are based upon observations and experimentation in the world of matter, life, mind and society." Applying the test of Phenix's definition to various academic disciplines, it was determined that the social, biological and physical sciences in addition to engineering, mathematics and certain areas of business predominantly used empirical methods to deal with their respective bodies of knowledge.

A final major element in the philosophical roots of our approach was stated by Robert Ardrey. He wrote that three elements are necessary in order for a community to develop: 1) security within the physical and emotional

environment; 2) identity with that environment; and 3) stimulation from that environment.[5]

From the core of the thinking of these three writers and the previously stated assumptions, the Johnson-McFarlane Empirical Program was born in 1970.

IMPLEMENTATION OF JOHNSON-McFARLANE "EMPIRICAL" HALL

To make existing facilities in Johnson-McFarlane Hall appropriate for the Empirical Program, there was need for some renovation and the acquisition of equipment. Walls were added here and there and equipment was either purchased or otherwise acquired until, presently, in Johnson-McFarlane there is a resource room which includes computer terminals, a key-punch machine, several programmable calculators with varying degrees of sophistication, several listening stations, microscopes, and nearly a thousand resource books. Additionally, there is a conference room, horticulture lab with atmospheric controls for light, temperature and humidity, a darkroom and a study room. To encourage more social interaction, a snack bar was constructed. The importance of facilities and equipment is not that of serving specific needs as would be the case in an interaction between the student and a piece of inanimate machinery. Rather, the importance of facilities and equipment is seen in the interaction among students using them.

In addition to the change in physical facilities, the staffing structure was modified and job expectations were changed from a more or less traditional model to one in which the involvement of the students within the program was of utmost importance.

Presently, the hall is coordinated by a full-time professional resident director. The director has a staff of twelve to implement the program. On that staff are two part-time resident associate directors whose central jobs are administering the building under the supervision of the resident director. Additionally, there are four assistant directors who are either highly experienced undergraduates or graduate students in one of the disciplines to which the program is addressed. Finally, there are six program assistants who are predominantly undergraduates majoring in one of the empirical fields. Generally, the duties of the assistant directors and program assistants include many of the traditional residential or floor responsibilities as well as specific responsibility in one of the empirical program efforts.

It is the staff of the hall that is most important in making the program go. They are the ones who must have a clear understanding of the purposes of the program and

possess the skills in working with people and working with ideas to stimulate students into a personal experience that effectively integrates a social life with the intellectual life.

IMPLEMENTATION OF CENTENNIAL TOWERS "SYMBOLIC" HALL

After the first year's experience with Johnson-McFarlane Empirical Hall, it was determined that there was enough positive evidence to indicate that the approach had merit and a second program was created to develop a residence hall community within Phenix's conceptualization. This time "symbolism" and "aesthetics" were merged. Phenix defines symbolism and aesthetics in the following words: "... symbolics comprises ordinary language ... and various types of nondiscursive symbolic forms such as gestures, rituals, rhythmic patterns and the like. These meanings are contained in arbitrary symbolic structures with socially acceptable rules of formation and transformation created as instruments for expression and communication of any meaning whatsoever ...

"Aesthetics contain the various arts such as music, the visual arts, the arts of movement and literature. Meanings in this realm are concerned with contemplative perception of particular significant things ...."

In applying the test of the definition of these two interrelated areas, it was determined that art, music, theater, speech, mass communication, English, philosophy, religion and history fall within this framework.

As in the case of the empirical hall, it was necessary to modify facilities and purchase some equipment. Presently, within the hall there is a closed circuit radio station (KAOS), motion picture and still film production equipment, both portable and stationary video tape units, an art center that includes a wide range of facilities for pottery, painting and leatherwork, a small dance studio, an experimental theater, music practice rooms and a sound production area. Staffing was changed into a model comparable to the empirical program. The symbolic program, too, is coordinated by a resident director.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of something as complex as the impact of an environment on those participants within that environment is difficult at best. One may only look at certain specific behaviors, results or patterns and then hope to formulate an impression of the whole.

Academic Behaviors. Although there are no academic requirements for involvement in either of the programs, we have seen academic performances (measured by grade

point average) show marked improvement, especially among students in the empirical hall. Johnson-McFarlane students have been consistently between three- and five-tenths of a point higher than students (matched by class) living off campus.

There are cases in which students' options for meeting class requirements have been expanded. For instance, some faculty are accepting film, audio or video tape projects, or horticulture projects, where, in the past, requirements could only be met through a traditional term paper.

Another unanticipated benefit has been in the case of either confirming or disconfirming career goals. Students have the opportunity to interact more intensely and intimately with people holding similar career goals than is possible in a traditional heterogeneous residence hall. This interaction, along with their more cognatively based classroom experience, gives the students a clearer view of whether they will like, intellectually and personally, a career in a certain field. There have been cases directly attributable to this residence experience which have either confirmed, in the student's mind, a career direction he was to take or precipitated a change in career goals. In certain instances, it was discovered that even though a student intellectually enjoyed a major leading to a certain career, personality differences between himself and others who intended to enter that career were too great for him to be comfortable.

Student Involvement. Student involvement has been at a very high level. One of the largest problems has been delimiting areas of involvement to the levels of possibility both fiscally and in terms of personal resources.

It is generally held that students are affected by the environment just by living there and interacting with others, but additionally, a very large number—possibly over one-half of the students—are involved in some program-related opportunity on at least a weekly basis. Of course, this is most true in the symbolic hall where performance-related activities are more prominent.

Student Satisfaction. The indices of satisfaction are as fleeting and variable as the weather. However, one rather firm index is retention within the program from year to year. Especially, in the Empirical Hall have we seen dramatic improvements. Prior to the establishment of the program, only 6-8 percent of students remained in the hall from one year to the next. Retention now is at four to five times that level. The improvement in Symbolic Hall has not been as significant for, as yet, unidentified reasons but students in that program appear to feel a great need for privacy and being able to live in a smaller unit such as a house.

Incidentally, the added income resulting from the increased retention would pay for the capital cost for the initiation of both programs in just one year.

Community Development. In addition to anecdotal reports from participating students that there is a sense of uniqueness and closeness among a large segment of the participants in each program, one major research study was done by Dr. Thomas Williams, Resident Director of the Empirical Program.[5] One of the main conclusions in his study was that academic programming in the model assisted in community development and raising of the intellectual atmosphere. He further found that academic programming helped in generating high personal involvement, a supportive environment, interdependence and meaningful student experience.

SUMMARY

The University of Denver is attempting to make the college experience a more cohesive and productive one for its students. This is being done by two residential programs that complement the classroom where the student's relationship with knowledge and information is primarily passive. By that, it is meant that the student, in the classroom, is responsible primarily for assimilating, internalizing and synthesizing information. These complementary residential programs offer the student the chance to manipulate and play with the ideas that have been stimulated in the classroom in a more active fashion.

It is our intent that the "constancy of change" become the operating model for our programs. By this we mean that we are determined to keep the program from becoming static. Physical facilities are under continual scrutiny by the residence hall director and the community. New facilities and equipment are always on the drawing board. Whenever a staff position becomes available, we recruit people who can offer a different thrust to our wholistic approach to education and community development. Hence, there is an ongoing dialogue with other members of the academic community—a vital dialogue that will help us to achieve our goals by unfolding new and better ways for our program to expand beyond the classroom experience.

Special thanks to Thomas Williams, Rebecca Snyder, Erma Anderson and Lucille Burns

Footnotes:

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3. Nisbet, Robert, *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971.
4. Phenix, Phillip, *Realms of Meaning*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964
5. Ardrey, Robert, *The Territorial Imperative*, New York: Dell, 1966
6. Williams, Thomas W., doctoral dissertation, "A Comparison of Community Development in Selected Residence Hall Programs at the University of Denver," August, 1973